Strange Waters

By

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I.

LOW CLOUD and the invisible surf of thunder,
The shrouded sun gone under,
Then darkness and the sad rain falling,
And once, far off, an unseen sea-bird calling.
I cannot sleep. There are shadows in the night—
Come not for absence of the blessed light.

Why should a sea-bird wail?
Whither can be her flight?
The winds are battling above.
Under the wings of the gale
I will tell their bitter tale,
A tale of forbidden love.

(I shall get no thanks for it,
Where the righteous in judgment sit.)

Ralph Narron, of the Mendocinan hills,
Built him a house and married Mary Quinn,
A girl of western Ireland. Happiness
Drowsed on their threshold, for their needs were few
And their love-hunger long to satisfy.
There was a village not too far away;
He had a tiny income: all went well.
Leisure was his for rhyming; as for her,
She had her flowers and a house of doves.
The wind from off a thousand leagues of sea
Set rapture in their blood. The summer fog
Fought with the sun. The winter rains were sweet.

So pain, the shadow of the wings of Time,
Stood off from them until the certain hour.
Sometimes they longed for friends of their own kind,
And often for dear children. Neither came.
Saturday. Ralph came home and threw the mail
Into her lap—four letters, one of which
Bore the mild countenance of England's queen
Upon its postage. Mary gave one glance,
Then cried: "My God! it's Brian!" as she threw
The missive on the floor. Ralph picked it up.
She stared at it as tho it were a snake.

Once only had she mentioned him before,
Her brother, living in an ancient house
Built on a sea-cliff of green Donegal—
Once only, and to call him "monster." Pressed
To give a reason, she shut eyes and wept. . . .
But still the letter. "Open it," she said,
Turning away her face. He broke the seal. . . .
"Well, read it," and he read—such words as these:
"Mary:
When this is in your holy hands,
I shall be carrion, hidden in a tomb
Above our house of stone in Donegal.
This body shall be sweet as is my name
In your soul's nostrils. But the real joke's
To come: within a month my tall twin-girls
Will stand before your threshold. With your heart,
You can but take them in. Do so, my dear,
And they'll avenge me for a distant hour,
Your nails along my cheek, your virtuous words.
Don't think they come as beggers: I have sold
My acres here, and twenty thousand pounds
Are to their credit. Take my babies in.
Ha! We are of the same blood, they and I!
There's more in that than you've a notion of."

The letter closed with a maimed signature,
And Mary frowned and smiled, and smiled and frowned.
"My nieces! And his children! Joy and shame!
But still, my nieces. They'll be eighteen now."
"So old as that!"
"Yes, he's eleven years
Older than I."
"How old is he today?
As old as Pharaoh. Well, God speed their feet!"
"But Ralph, think for awhile: What could he mean
By saying they'll avenge him?"
"But for what?"
"That doesn't matter. Surely he was mad. . . .
Perhaps. . . . It might be better if they went
To some good school."
"Oh, well, let's wait and see.
We'll have to wait: no stopping them."
"I'm cold.
Rub my two hands. We'll see what they are like."

They saw. It was by morning and in May.
There came a knocking on the kitchen door,
And Ralph was nearer. He threw back the catch.

How can I tell you what he saw, who once
Alone have seen them, and you not at all?
I sit and muse. They were beyond the pace
Of laggard words. "Twin eaglets," once I said.
"Twin eaglets, fierce of eye and orange-crowned."
Slender they stood, and tall, Callirhoe
An inch the taller, shouldered like a boy.
Diedre more girlish, rosier of face.
And with red hair they had that skin of snow

That seems so cool, and which conceals such fire.
O mythical, lost beauty that men sought
In dim, heroic years! You shone restored
In that high loveliness, those faces blent
Of ocean's foam and sapphire, and earth's rose!
But most one felt the challenge of their eyes,
As pure as winter moonlight in the dew,
Blue jewels, half-defiant. Deidre's gleamed
The milder, it may be. So, side by side,
They stood, and stared Ralph Narron in the face.

"Come in," he said at last, and swung the door
Wider. But Mary ran and grasped their hands,
Those long, white hands, and kissed them on the mouth.
(Callirhoe winced). "Welcome, my dears!" she cried.
"This is your home, if you will have it so.
You favor Brian. Are you tired? Come in!"
And beauty crossed the threshold of the good.

Let us go out to the West, my sister,
Let us go out!
Tho the clouds are grey with doubt,
And the rain may soon be falling.
I can hear the breakers cry
In sorrow to the sky
I can hear the sea-bird calling.

Let us go far to the West, my sister,
Let us go far,
Where the wilder waters are
And the final, unknown danger.
It is dawn to-day in the breast,
With the shadows pointing West
To a sea where the winds are stranger.

Let us go swift to the West, my sister,
Let us go swift!
For the foam-flowers break and drift
On a tide we shall take in sorrow.
Let us set our breasts to the foam,
Making the sea our home
Who shall have no home to-morrow.

Then on the Narrons swept a strange, new life,
And hours undreamt before. Like sea-born things,
Rather than simple maidens, seemed the two.
They had their room, with its great bed of oak,
But shunned it till the night. Fog or no fog,
They ran wind-footed to the reef or cliff,
For all the mighty Mendocinan coast,
With desolate mountains ending in the sea,
Was theirs for heritage. The crystal pools;
The snowy beaches of untrodden sand,
Where the huge breaker hung with emerald throat;
The struggling surf around the stubborn reefs;
The pure quicksilver of a leaning wave
Below the moon; those sentinels on Time,
The dark, titanic redwoods; wraiths of fog
That touched the sun to silver; thrones of cloud
Where no god sat, and azure-spreading winds—
All were their own, whose feet were swift to gain
Those lonely leagues of beauty. So they roamed,
Till that great wave whose foam is dawn and sunset
Ebbed slowly, leaving them the stranded stars,
And night let in the infinite on man.
Three times a day they swam, for that chill sea
Offered no terrors; but they swam alone,
Still uncompanioned, finding crescent sands,
Northward or southward, trackless little arcs
Set in between the paws of every hill,

And took the surf in solitude. Ralph, once,
Would make a third, which curtly was refused.
Sometimes a fisherman or hunter saw
The bright heads lifting on the billow's crest,
But while he gazed, they would not come to land—
Tireless as gulls. "Modesty," Mary said.
"The Gaels were always so. Why, every night
They bolt their door! What is it that they fear
From me, their aunt? They're daft with modesty.
As if I cared!" But when the evening fell
The two wild things came in with the first star,
And for an hour or two would sit in quiet,
Or speak when questioned. For the greater part,
They locked their gaze, and smiled with chiseled lips
Each on the other—smiles that stirred the heart
To dim foreboding. Books they mostly scorned,
And yet they had been schooled by their mad sire:
The wisdom (and the passions) of the Past
Were theirs from childhood. Ralph could call himself
A deist, and might rouse Callirhoe
To some retort, then turn with bitten lip—
Floored with an epigram from Diderot.
He learned in time to leave their souls in peace,
But often he would feel Callirhoe
Staring at him across the lamplight. He,
Meeting her gaze, would wonder at her mood,
Finding a sense of cruelty and fear,
Of exultation, insolence and grief
In those great eyes. He wavered from their stares.

So more and more a dusk of strangeness crept,
An inner shadow cast by inner light,
Around that household. What was in the air?
What bat of evil covered with soft wings
That house of quietudes? Why went the two

Arm around waist forever? Why did each
Turn on the other, early day or night,
The sapphire adoration of her eyes?
It was not natural. It was not right
That two of the same sex should care so much!
Mary saw nothing, in her innocence,
But sometimes Ralph would listen at their door
And hear, like doves far off, the muffled sounds
Of rapture—so it seemed. Could he be sure?
Or was it sorrow for the father dead?
So, day by day, the dim uneasiness
Deepened to irritation, till one night,
Chancing to read "Hesperia," his eyes
Came to the words:
"The bitter delights of the dark, and the feverish,
the furtive caresses."
The tiny shards of the kaleidoscope
Clicked into pattern, to a black mosaic.

He saw them in the heaven of their hell.
He knew. He knew. Now it must soon be said—
That word of terror. But at first he spoke
Of cities, and of travel and old seas,
That should seem new. They would have none of that,
Content, ah! too content, to roam that coast
And hear the ocean and the ocean-wind,
And watch the sunset cities lift in rose.

Fate seats a skeleton at every feast,
Whether she crown the skull with flower or thorn.
So at the last she struck. One autumn night,
Ralph, his pride wounded by Callirhoe,
With some bright rapier of repartee,
Whispered: "Since you will not admit nor fear

Infinite Mind, perhaps you bend the knee
At softer shrines. Shall Sappho have no flame
Upon her altar? Are her girls so cold
That her lascivious feasts are held no more,
Her ritual forgotten? Are the sounds
With which you flood the darkness those of pain
Or of forbidden raptures?" Mary drowsed,
But the two girls drew back like gorgeous snakes
About to strike. The drill had found the nerve!
They rose, in single impulse, blood a-flame
In face and neck, then, with no spoken word,
Ran to their room. Mary looked up and said:
"Why, what's amiss? They didn't say good night!
You must have hurt them, Ralph." He, furious,
Hissed back: "They'll never sleep another night—
Not in my house, the Lesbians!"
"What's that?"
"I said 'the Lesbians.' Is that not plain?"
"You don't—you can't—believe it!"
"Wait awhile.
"I'll prove it." So they waited. Half an hour
Revealed its centuries. Then Ralph arose.
"Quietly," he said. They tiptoed to the door
Of the girls' room. Again that sound of doves.
The door was like a seal on mysteries.
Whatever else it hid, it hid delight.
He turned the knob. The trusty bolt was shot.
The moaning ceased. The night was like a tomb.
Then a low laughter made the dark obscene.
They went to their room without a word.

Let us go down to the sea, my sister,
Let us go down,
Tho at last the wild sea drown

And our hearts be torn asunder.
There is nothing more to fear,
Nor music in my ear
Glad as the sea's slow thunder.

Let us go far on the sea, my sister,
Let us go far,
Follow our evening star
Till the fallen moonlight glitter.
There is nothing more to fear,
And only one word to hear,
For love and the sea are bitter.

Let us take heart of the sea, my sister,
Let us take heart,
Tho it bear our breasts apart,
And we clasp no more forever.
There is nothing more to fear
Nor need of a single tear,
Where grief and desire come never.

Morning, and all its crystal on the world.
Far off, the crying of the gulls. They woke
And Mary hastened to that ardent bed.
'Twas empty. At the earliest hint of dawn
The girls had risen, quiet as two flowers,
And found the usual pathway to the sea.
"They can't put that on me," said Ralph, and snarled!
"The amorous reptiles leave our home today!
Come on: we'll follow them." The dusty trail
Was broken by the print of slender feet.
They followed. For a mile the footsteps ran
Along the cliffs, then sought a little beach

And seemed to end. An early fisherman
Stood on a reef a quarter-mile away.
They went to him. "Your redheads? I saw one.
She must be out to sea a mile by now.
I saw her take the surf at yonder beach,
Alone, and watched her head on every wave,
Until she faded in the distance. Say—
She'll be in China in a week or two!
Who taught those girls to swim? The other one?
No—I saw naught of her." They stood and stared,
Then hurried to the beach. Vacant it seemed.
Then Mary cried: "Ah! look!" Close to the cliff
A body lay. They found Callirhoe,
Clad scantily in her scarlet bathing suit,
With golden-rod still clutched in her left hand:
Two-score of feet above it crowned a ledge.
Ralph knelt, half lifting her. The splendid head
Lolled drunkenly on the torso. She was cold—
Cold as the sea. "She's dead. A broken neck.
And Deidre?" Mary climbed a jutting crag
And stared far seaward. "No—you'll look in vain.
She's gone forever. Come and help me lift
The other." As she turned, his voice ran shrill:
"Christ, Mary! Christ! Callirhoe 's a boy!"

The lone, tremendous Mendocinan coast
Mourned with the world-chord of the surf. Far off
They heard the mindless clamor of the gulls.